Isaac Witkin

Isaac Witkin, *Jacob’s Dream*, 1986
aluminum, 8’ 7” x 6’ x 32”
Lent by Tamari Witkin Marcus

bronze, 6’ x 8’ 6” x 4’
Lent by Tamari Witkin Marcus
Tamari Witkin Marcus, artist’s daughter

Witkin’s Imagination and Inspiration

Dad was a very imaginative person, and very intuitive, and his process was almost as if he were working in a dream. Even though he was conscious of everything that he was doing, and he made his sculpture in order to create something new and different, while he was making his work he would get into a transportive state. He would play operatic music really loud in the studio and he would just allow himself to get transported by the melodies, by the sound of voice. He himself had a beautiful singing voice, and he would sing sometimes. And I remember just when he passed away, the caretaker of the blueberry farm in which he lived was particularly distraught because he remembered Isaac on his riding mower singing at the top of his lungs. And Dad would sometimes sing when he created his sculpture, so it’s not unusual that the pieces were inspired by song, or by myth, by stories. He was not much of a reader, but he would hear about a story or remember a story from Nadine’s or my childhood and be particularly taken with an aspect of the story and try to envision it in a work of art.

Tamari Witkin Marcus, artist’s daughter

Jacob’s Dream

Jacob’s Dream has got a very unique patina. It’s got a kind of greyish-white patina which looks almost like clouds. And that’s the whole effect that he was trying to create, the effect of a ladder, Jacob’s ladder, almost made out of clouds. You see what could be a figure climbing up the ladder, but it’s not certain, it’s just a suggestion, and then you see the kind of striated clouds above, which is where the angel is supposed to have emerged. And the whole piece is also about wrestling, like the wrestling with the angel. He was particularly concerned with wrestling with the concept of God, and spirituality and this was a very, very meaningful topic for him. So that piece has a number of layers of meaning for him. Jacob’s Dream was made of aluminum, actually. It’s an unusual medium for him, but he’s able to manipulate the material in such a delicate way that it’s just exactly in keeping with the language of the other pieces that he made contemporaneous to that piece.

Tamari Witkin Marcus, artist’s daughter

Maiden’s Dream

Maiden’s Dream was made in 1996 and that piece was inspired by a couple of things. It was inspired by the Death and the Maiden String Quartet of Schubert. Also the story of Rapunzel, because you got the figures that are sort of anthropomorphic, and that was intentional for him to incorporate elements in the sculpture that look or suggested the human figure, and suggested animals. You see a variation of the maiden’s hair, and you see what looks like it could be a dagger or animals. And there are all sorts of forms in there, figures that are sort of writhing and twisting in this sculpture that creates the language of this piece.
Brooke Barrie, former director of Grounds for Sculpture

Metal Pours

The process that he kind of devised or discovered while at the Johnson Atelier was pouring bronze directly on a bed of resin-hardened sand, so it allowed him to, with a ladle, use the molten bronze almost as a drawing tool. He could pour shapes or long linear forms and then he would take these forms after they cooled and then assemble them or weld them together in a sculpture. The sand was mixed with a resin binder and catalyst which set the resin binder off, and made it into a hard block, a refractory block, which could withstand the temperature of the molten metal being poured on it. It was almost like a blackboard if you will, but something that could withstand molten metal. Sometimes what he did was he’d take a block of sand and he’d carve out some of the shapes to give a little bit more definition. For the most part, they were kind of free-form pours, and very much like drawing with molten metal.

Brooke Barrie, former director of Grounds for Sculpture

Making Outdoor Sculpture

A number of them were specifically made for an outdoor setting and when an artist approaches that, it’s a different approach than making a studio piece. In particular with Isaac, it allowed him to go much larger than he normally would with some of the pieces. Not only the material allowed that, but also color. I remember a piece of Isaac’s called United We Stand, which was black and white which harkened back to his roots in South Africa, and also to, you know, racial issues. I remember him saying to me once, “There’s nothing like a cow in the landscape” as far as the color and the drama of that black and white cow on a lush green field. I’ve always liked looking at cows in the landscape myself, and I can’t help but think of that when I think of some of his use of color. I think it allowed him to experiment a little bit more with how those objects exist in an environment outdoors as opposed to a studio or a gallery.

Mystery Family Tour

You are looking at two sculptures by Isaac Witkin, titled Jacob’s Dream and Maiden’s Dream. Look and listen carefully to solve the mystery of what inspired these sculptures. Walk around these sculptures and look at them from all sides. What do you see? The artist, Isaac, named these sculptures Jacob’s Dream and Maiden’s Dream. If these sculptures were in your dreams, what would they be doing? Would the sculptures move? I think in my dream they would! Use your body to move like you would imagine the sculptures would move. Do you think they would make noise? If yes, try to make the noise you think they would make. Do the sculptures seem to be alive? These sculptures are often thought to be figures or creatures from another world. What do you think? Do they seem scary or friendly? Isaac created Jacob’s Dream based on a story in the Bible. In this story, Jacob falls asleep outside on a stone and dreams about a ladder that connects heaven and Earth. Do you think Isaac’s sculpture could represent the ladder from the dream?